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urloined;
Sleuths
Stumped

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Sometime after the Gatlin Brothers concert and possibly as George Burns delivered his zingers or the chorus reached the crescendo of Handel's "Messiah," someone stole a \$9,500 painting from the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall.

Between Friday night and Sunday night, a thief or thieves removed a 24-by-18-inch work of art by Jon Corbino from a public reception area below the stage and slipped out, it was revealed Wednesday.

Guards patrol around the clock at the purple-painted concert hall on North Tamiami Trail, overlooking Sarasota Bay, but apparently weren't in the area when the theft was committed.

"I can only speculate that when the show is on and people are in their seats, there might be some moments when nobody's there," said Bill Mitchell, the deputy director of house operations. "Or the persons could have hid someplace until the building was empty, and then let themselves out."

Though the building has an alarm system, Mitchell said, "nothing was tripped" and there were no signs of forced entry.

The number of possible suspects is limitless, according to Sarasota police.

"The painting was merely hanging freely unsecured on a wall and could have been taken by anyone," the police report states. "The question of who took it is anybody's guess since several hundred people have been in there over the weekend."

Mitchell said he last saw the purloined painting on Friday night as he escorted a guest through the hall during the Gatlin Brothers concert.

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Vanishing Act At Van Wezel Has Sleuths Stumped

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On Saturday night, the Van Wezel featured "An Evening With George Burns," and on Sunday, the Sarasota Choral Society gave two performances of the "Messiah."

It was on Monday that maintenance crews discovered the absence of the painting and notified authorities.

"It's a big loss," Mitchell said. "It was one of the favorite pieces in the collection."

The work, titled "Palette," is actually painted on an artist's wooden palette instead of a canvas. A predominant figure in the painting is a circus woman riding bareback on a horse.

It was done in the 1960s by Corbino, who had been a leading painter of the 1930s and '40s. His works are exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and more than 60 other museums and public collections.

Born in Sicily, Corbino moved to New York in 1911 and made Sarasota his home in 1957. He lived in Sarasota until his death in 1964, according to his youngest son, Michael, now the director of the Corbino galleries on Main Street.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY FINE ARTS SOCIETY

The work is one of only two the artist, Jon Corbino, is known to have painted on palettes.

The stolen painting, while the less expensive of the two Jon Corbino works displayed at the Van Wezel, is one of the only two that the artist is known to have painted on palettes, Michael Corbino said.

It is owned by the Fine Arts Society of Sarasota, which also displays about 40 other works in the Van Wezel.

"It was a very good example of his later style," Michael Corbino said. "His circus-type paintings are really the most in demand."

"They took the best work in the place," said *Herald-Tribune* art critic Joan Altabe. "Whoever took it was someone who knew quality, someone who knew it was the highest-priced artist in the room."

It is the only painting ever stolen from the Van Wezel, said Joan Ward, the curator of fine arts for the Fine Arts Society.

"We've never had this kind of problem before," Ward said.

Police said the painting had

been hung next to an exit that is not connected to the alarm system.

Ward said her group plans to meet this week to discuss the question of whether security should be beefed up to protect the collection better.

Michael Corbino said he believes that because the painting is so unusual, whoever stole it will find it difficult to sell or display without attracting attention.

"The art world is really quite small," he said. "I have a feeling this is going to show up sooner or later."